

# Otto Skorzeny

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## "The most dangerous man in Europe"

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Otto Skorzeny, Hitler's commando leader in World War 2, became known to the world in September 1943, when German radio broadcasts hailed the previously unknown Skorzeny as "The most dangerous man in Europe" for his key role in the daring airborne raid to rescue the ousted Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

It was Skorzeny's 1st success as a commando leader. With the successes that followed, allied media also began calling Skorzeny "The most dangerous man in Europe".

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### The unusual making of a commando leader

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The son of an Austrian civil engineer, until World War 2 began Skorzeny (1908-1975) lived and worked as an engineer in Vienna, Austria. In 1931 Skorzeny joined the Austrian branch of the Nazi Party, and remained a loyal Nazi for the rest of his life.

There were three seemingly unimportant details in Skorzeny's pre-war life which became important later:

1. In 1934 Skorzeny and his wife spent their honeymoon in Italy.
2. On March 12, 1938, when Nazi Germany annexed Austria, Skorzeny demonstrated leadership and cold judgement by saving the Austrian president Wilhelm Miklas from being murdered by other Austrian Nazis.
3. Ernst Kaltenbrunner, then the head of the Austrian branch of the Nazi SS, knew Skorzeny and knew of his action in saving Miklas.

When World War 2 started in 1939, Skorzeny was immediately recruited, but in the first 3 1/2 years of the war his military career path showed no sign that he would become a commando leader in the two years that followed.

Initially assigned to an Air Force technical personnel training class, Skorzeny then passed the admission tests of the all-volunteer elite Waffen SS, the Nazi party's private army, and was assigned to its basic combat training as technical officer candidate.

During the invasion of France in May 1940, Skorzeny mostly "chased the war", as an acting technical officer in the heavy artillery unit of the 1st Waffen SS Division, in the trail of the rapidly advancing German forces.

A year later Skorzeny participated in the German invasion of Russia as a technical officer in the 2nd Waffen SS division, Das Reich (The Reich).

In Russia, Skorzeny saw some real combat action. He was awarded the Iron Cross medal, and in late 1941 he was injured by shrapnel from Russian artillery rockets. He refused to be evacuated, and continued to fight with Das Reich in Russia, until the combination of his superficially treated head injury and disease enforced his evacuation to a hospital in Vienna.

Once out of hospital, on a medical recovery period, Skorzeny was assigned to a non-combat role in a Waffen SS depot in Berlin. It was a boring role and he wanted to return to the front, but in the meantime, he had many months in Berlin with plenty of spare time to read and to meet with fellow Waffen SS officers. Skorzeny utilized this period to read all the literature that he could find about commando warfare, and to share his ideas about the subject with anyone who would listen to a junior technical officer's ideas about commando warfare.

Skorzeny's main argument, based on his experience in the Russian front, was that the German army, which demonstrated innovative warfare early in the war, gradually deteriorated to an ordinary war of attrition. His proposed solution was to establish units specialized in unconventional warfare that will include fighting behind enemy lines, fighting in enemy uniform, sabotage attacks, etc.

All that talking eventually paid off, when in April 1943 Skorzeny was summoned to the Waffen SS headquarters and was told that the Waffen SS was looking for "a technically trained officer to carry out special duties". Skorzeny accepted immediately, and was promoted to Captain, as the commander of a recently established Waffen SS unit named SS Special Unit Friedenthal, after the location of its barracks at Friedenthal, near Berlin.

Comment: During Skorzeny's tenure as commander (1943-1945), his unit was renamed twice, first to SS Hunters Battalion 502, (the term Hunters denoted a broad range of German light infantry units, from paratroopers to military police), and then in November 1944 to SS Combat Unit "Center", and by then it expanded from a small unit to five battalions.

## **SS Special Unit Friedenthal**

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Until 1943, the German army did not think that it needed units for unconventional special warfare deep behind enemy lines. Germany had a mighty army, the best in the world then, and it was not restrained by political, diplomatic, or moral constraints. In those years, Adolf Hitler did not have to limit himself to sending commandos to neighbouring countries. He simply sent his army to invade and occupy them.

For military action behind enemy lines during those invasions, two types of units were used, mostly to capture key targets by using the element of surprise, and then to temporarily hold them until relieved by the advancing main German invasion force. These units were the Paratroopers, and the Brandenburg Regiment of the German military intelligence, which utilized soldiers fluent in foreign languages and dressed in enemy uniforms to achieve the element of surprise.

But as Skorzeny argued, this was no longer enough for Germany. The war was increasingly turning against it, and it could no longer quickly occupy enemy territories. This finally brought the need for a military unit capable of extended activity deep behind enemy lines.

Since such activity was considered a military extension of the espionage and sabotage activities done by spies, the new unit was going to work for the Ausland-SD (Foreign Security Department), the espionage branch of the RSHA, the security organization within the Nazi SS that included the GESTAPO (secret police), the SD (internal security), the Ausland-SD (foreign espionage), criminal investigations, and the Einsatzgruppen (death squads in charge of the mass murder of entire population groups in the occupied countries).

Simply put, Skorzeny's new unit belonged to the military branch of the SS, and provided its military-scale sabotage and attack capabilities to the espionage branch of the SS, where such capabilities, greater than those of spies, were required.

In early 1943, the SS was looking for the right man, among its officers, to lead its new special unit. They wanted a person with a combination of leadership, good judgement in sensitive situations, combat experience, technical skills, and fanatic Nazi loyalty.

Skorzeny's name was apparently suggested by no other than Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who by 1943 was the head of the RSHA.

Kaltenbrunner knew Skorzeny from their pre-war years in Vienna, and he must have remembered how Skorzeny, the Nazi engineer, demonstrated unusually good political judgement, and leadership, in saving the Austrian president from his trigger-happy SS fellows on that night in 1938. By 1943 Skorzeny was a decorated Waffen-SS officer with a combat experience, a man who demonstrated courage and dedication, was fanatically loyal, and also advocated that Germany needs to establish unconventional warfare units. Kaltenbrunner knew that although the 35 years old Skorzeny was just a Lieutenant then, he found the man he was looking for.

Skorzeny began training his men for their intended special missions, repeatedly telling them that in their special type of warfare behind enemy lines, **not shooting**, as much as possible, should be their most important guideline. He intended to impose following that guideline in future action by "running ahead of my men, and not firing my own gun".

### **Operation Oak to find and rescue Mussolini**

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On July 26, 1943, Skorzeny and his unit were fully ready for action, when Hitler learned that his political and military ally and friend Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator of Italy, was ousted and arrested by his countrymen.

The Italian people got tired of their failing megalomaniac dictator, who was much better in words than in deeds. In four years of war, Italy lost its territories in North Africa and in East Africa. Sicily, its large island in the South, was occupied by The Allies, and an allied

invasion of Italy's mainland was imminent.

Overthrowing Mussolini was quick and bloodless. The king summoned him to his villa, told Mussolini that the people hates him and he must go, and when Mussolini stepped out of the king's office, he was arrested. The king appointed Pietro Badoglio, a former politician and army Chief of Staff, as the new temporary Prime Minister.

Hitler was terribly furious about these news. He was so furious not just because his fellow dictator and friend was overthrown, but also because there was very little he could do about it. He could not retaliate by invading Italy, because Italy was still his ally in the war, and the new Italian government immediately assured him that they remain loyal allies, which they did, for a while.

It was clear to both sides that the new Italian government was quietly looking for a way to switch sides in the war, to end its long alliance with Nazi Germany, and to most likely deliver the arrested Mussolini to The Allies as a gesture. But so far Italy kept fighting shoulder to shoulder with the German military, which was already deployed in large numbers in Italy. All that Hitler could do, was to try to find where the Italians were hiding Mussolini before they delivered him to The Allies, and only then act to rescue him, in order to put him back in power by force, this time as a German puppet backed by German military power.

So on the day after Mussolini's arrest, Otto Skorzeny and five other commanders of Germany's most elite military units, were urgently summoned to "Wolfsschanze" (Wolf's Lair), Hitler's heavily guarded command post in the forests of East Prussia. Once there, the six officers, of which Skorzeny was of the lowest rank, met Adolf Hitler. Hitler did not tell them why they were summoned. Instead, after each of them presented himself, Hitler simply asked each of them two questions:

1. Are you familiar with Italy ?
2. What do you think of Italy ?

To the 1st question, only Skorzeny answered 'Yes', referring to his honeymoon in Italy nine years earlier.

To the 2nd question, while the other five officers gave politically correct answers about Italy being an Ally and so on, Skorzeny decided to gamble and answered just: "I am an Austrian, Fuhrer". It was a short answer that said a lot. Skorzeny knew that Hitler, also originally Austrian, will understand that he was thinking of the traditional hostility between Austria and Italy, which increased after World War I.

The gamble paid off. Hitler dismissed the other officers, and after they left, he told Skorzeny what really happened in Italy (German news media reported that Mussolini resigned for poor health), and told him that he entrusts him with a mission of the highest strategic importance, to rescue Mussolini before he will be delivered to The Allies.

For both convenience and secrecy, for the duration of the mission, Skorzeny was placed under the command of General Kurt Student, the commander of the German Paratroopers Corps, who was also sent to Italy that day with a large force of elite Paratroopers, for the same reason, but also to prepare to occupy Rome by force if necessary. Skorzeny was to pose as General Student's adjutant.

After meeting with Student in "Wolfsschanze" that night, Skorzeny phoned his deputy, Karl Radl, and told him that they were given a mission that can not be discussed over the phone, and asked him to prepare, by dawn, a very long list of every kind of special equipment imaginable, from guns and explosives to black hair color and monk robes. Radl was also instructed to select forty of Friedenthal's best men, including all those who spoke Italian, and also bring with him ten secret agents from the Ausland-SD headquarters, and ordered that all will be dressed as paratroopers. They all flew to the German military headquarters outside Rome.

In the seven weeks that followed, Skorzeny participated in the German intelligence gathering group effort to locate Mussolini and to plan a rescue operation. During those weeks, the suspicious Italians moved Mussolini to a different location three times, to prevent such a rescue attempt. Three times the Germans located where Mussolini was held, and three times he was moved before they raided the location.

Mussolini was first transferred to the tiny island Ponza, off Naples. Then he was moved to the tiny island La Maddalena, near Sardinia, where one of Skorzeny's Italian speaking commandos reported that he saw Mussolini from a distance in an isolated villa. Skorzeny then flew in a bomber to take aerial photos of the location. The bomber was shot down by allied fighters, but Skorzeny and the bomber's crew were rescued by an Italian destroyer. Mussolini's new location was picked by Herbert Kappler, the police attache in the German embassy in Rome, who intercepted a seemingly unimportant Italian police radio transmission referring to security preparations around Gran Sasso, the highest mountain in the Italian Apennines.

Kappler immediately guessed that Mussolini is held in the ski hotel at the top of Gran Sasso, that was only accessible by cable car from the valley below. Further intelligence hints convinced the Germans that Mussolini might be on Gran Sasso.

The Germans had to really hurry now, since on September 3, 1943, The Allies invaded the Italian mainland, on September 8, Italy surrendered, and a day later The Allies landed further North, at Salerno, near Naples. Italy was not yet an enemy of Germany, but no longer its ally. Time was short. German preparations to rescue Mussolini from Gran Sasso were also minimal because of heavy allied air bombardments on the German bases near Rome.

Skorzeny flew again in a bomber, this time over Gran Sasso, and took pictures of it with a plain handheld camera. When he returned, an attack plan was quickly designed by General Student, Harald Mors (one of Student's paratrooper battalion commanders), and Skorzeny. The plan was simple, but not easy:

- Twelve DFS 230 assault gliders, each carrying 9 troops and a pilot, will be released from tow aircraft over Gran Sasso at a rate of one glider every minute. Each glider pilot will then have to struggle against the strong and unpredictable wind conditions above the 9500ft summit in an attempt to land on the tiny patch of straight soil next to the ski hotel, that was surrounded by steep slopes from all directions.
- Once on the ground, the troops will storm the ski hotel, where it was assumed that Mussolini was held, in an attempt to get to Mussolini before the surprised guards will have time to shoot him. Then, the Italian guards will have to be defeated and the mountain summit secured.
- A secondary force will simultaneously arrive by trucks to the lower cable car station at the base of the mountain and will secure it.
- Mussolini will then be flown off the Gran Sasso by a Storch light aircraft.

The glider-borne assault force, a total of 108 troops, was comprised of 81 paratroopers in 9 gliders, and Skorzeny with 25 of his men, and one guest, in 3 gliders. Skorzeny's "guest" was General Fernando Soleti of the Italian military police, who was kidnapped by Skorzeny's men and forced to board Skorzeny's glider. The idea was that his presence in the raid could further confuse the surprised Italian guards.

There was no time to arrange maps for the pilots, who arrived to Italy just before the raid, so they were instructed to just follow the lead aircraft, piloted by Student's intelligence officer.

Despite serious difficulties before and after it, the raid, on September 12, 1943, was a complete success. A few Italians and Germans were injured, but nobody was killed.

Skorzeny's glider was initially the 2nd in the row, but the lead tow aircraft, with the only pilot who knew how to navigate to Gran Sasso, had to abandon the lead, and Skorzeny's tow pilot suddenly found himself leading, but without a map. Skorzeny then used his knife to cut a small window in the glider's bottom, that was enough for him to successfully navigate to Gran Sasso, based on his memory of the flight path from his aerial photo flight a day earlier, and by passing navigation instructions to the glider pilot in front of him, who relayed them by cable to the tow aircraft's pilot.

Once on the ground, after landing near the ski hotel, Skorzeny ran forward, pushing General Soleti in front of him, looking for a door, when he saw Mussolini looking at him from a 2nd floor window. This was helpful, since he now knew exactly where to go. Skorzeny shouted to Mussolini to get inside, to avoid being hit by possible shots, and then charged into the hotel. The surprised Italian guards were further confused by General Soleti who shouted at them to avoid shooting, and less than a minute later Skorzeny broke into Mussolini's room and disarmed his two guards, as two more of his men came in from the window after climbing the wall. Once Mussolini was secured in his room, Skorzeny saluted him and declared that he was sent by Adolf Hitler to release him.

Within a few minutes, all the Italian guards in the ski hotel and the upper cable car station were disarmed without a single shot being fired. At the same time the Germans took over the lower cable car station after a short fire fight, and by the time of the last glider landing, the one that crashed, Mussolini was already out of the hotel, waiting for the Storch light aircraft that will fly him to safety.

The Storch, a small two seater light aircraft, was flown by Captain Heinrich Gerlach, General Student's personal pilot. After Gerlach landed, the big Skorzeny insisted to also board the tiny two seater aircraft, and placed himself in the small cargo bay behind Mussolini's seat. Skorzeny later explained this action in saying that he was not willing to risk a situation in which after a successful rescue he will face Hitler only to report that Mussolini was rescued but then crashed on the slopes of the Gran Sasso. He preferred to die in such a crash too.

Captain Gerlach, the pilot, had his own doubts about the chances of a successful takeoff, since in addition to having an incredibly short and rocky "runway" that ended in an abyss, that runway was also cut in the middle by a deep ditch that was not seen in the aerial photos that Skorzeny took a day earlier.

With Mussolini and Skorzeny onboard, Gerlach told the paratroopers to hold the small aircraft in place while he increased the engine's power to the maximum, and then signalled them to let go, and the small aircraft ran forward. When he reached the ditch, Gerlach pulled the stick to raise the aircraft a few inches in the air before it descended back to the ground after the ditch, and gained a little more speed before it fell down to the abyss at the end of the runway. With nerves of steel, Gerlach let the small aircraft dive down just over the steep mountain slope, and then slowly pulled the stick to level in the valley below, keeping the aircraft at tree top level to evade possible enemy fighters. He didn't tell his two passengers that the engine was damaged in the bumpy takeoff and was not fully functional.

They landed in a German controlled air base near Rome, where Mussolini and Skorzeny immediately transferred to a German bomber that flew them to Vienna, and from there Mussolini was flown to meet Hitler in "Wolfsschanze" that same day.

There were well deserved honors for all the key players. Skorzeny was promoted to Major and was awarded the Knights Cross, and became famous. Kappler, the German police attache, was also both promoted and decorated. Captain Gerlach, the Storch's Pilot, was awarded the Knights Cross for performing one of the most difficult takeoffs in the history of aviation. Others among the pilots, paratroopers, intelligence personnel, and Skorzeny's deputy, were either promoted or decorated.

The most complete and fully detailed report of Operation Oak, including a full background, can be found in Greg Annussek's book "Hitler's Raid To Save Mussolini" (Da Capo Press, 2005), which reads almost like a Tom Clancy fiction book, but is entirely documentary.

## **Skorzeny in 1944**

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Following their success in rescuing Mussolini, Skorzeny and his commandos returned to their base and continued training. Skorzeny now expanded his unit, and also gradually received control over other German special units, including the Navy's underwater sabotage divers and midget submarine units, and since May 1944 also of the Air Force's suicide ground attack unit, the German equivalent of the Japanese Kamikaze, called the Leonidas squadron.

The Leonidas Squadron was made of volunteer suicide pilots, supposed to fly a manned version of the V-1 cruise missile that will be carried to the target area by bombers of KG 200, the Luftwaffe's special missions air wing.

On July 20, 1944, when a group of senior German army officers attempted to overthrow the Nazi regime in Berlin following their failed attempt to assassinate Hitler at "Wolfsschanze", Skorzeny played a role in saving the Nazi regime. Once informed of the rebellion, he hurried, as instructed, to the SD headquarters in Berlin. He calmed the panic there, called a company of his men to secure the building, and then went to the Armor Corps headquarters, which controlled the most powerful unit in Berlin, the tank training school, which had tanks. The school's tanks already rolled into Berlin's streets in response to orders given by the rebel officers, but were already ordered to avoid fighting and behave as in ordinary training, making them useless to the rebels. After supporting the Armor Corps duty officer's decision to obey only orders from his normal chain of command, Skorzeny went to General Student's home in Berlin, where the two officers called Goering for further instructions. Skorzeny then returned to the SD headquarters, and with a group of armed SD agents he went to the rebels' headquarters in the Reserve Army headquarters building, where the rebel leaders were already arrested and some already executed. Skorzeny took control there, stopped the executions, transferred the remaining arrested rebels to a GESTAPO prison, and then remained in the Reserve Army headquarters as acting commander for the next 36 hours until relieved. Since then, Hitler trusted and appreciated Skorzeny even more.

Three months later, the army's Brandenburg Regiment was dismantled, and most of its men, foreign language speakers specialized in fighting behind enemy lines disguised as enemy soldiers, were transferred to Skorzeny's expanding unit, where they played a key role in its last special operation.

In October 1944, when Miklos Horthy, the Hungarian dictator and Hitler's ally, was secretly negotiating a surrender to Russia, Hitler sent Skorzeny's unit to force Horthy to stop. Skorzeny's men kidnapped Horthy's son and transferred him by plane to Germany. When that failed to convince Horthy to stop, Skorzeny's men went to the guarded citadel where Horthy was, and with a combination of words and gunfire, Skorzeny took over the citadel, and replaced Horthy with a new pro-German prime minister.

### **Operation Greif (Griffin)**

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Back from Hungary, Hitler promoted Skorzeny to Lieutenant Colonel and gave him a new mission. As part of the planned German offensive in the Ardennes in the last days of 1944 ("The Battle of the Bulge"), Hitler suggested that Skorzeny's English speaking men will infiltrate behind Allied lines dressed and equipped as American soldiers, in order to create mass confusion in The Allies side in support of the German attack. In addition to captured allied Jeeps, the Germans used Panther tanks and other German vehicles repainted and modified to look like Allied vehicles. For the duration of that operation, Skorzeny was given command of a makeshift unit named the 150th SS Panzer Brigade.

Hitler's idea was successful. In addition to the direct damage caused by the actions of Skorzeny's phony American soldiers, which posed mostly as American military policemen, the news and rumors of their activity spread rapidly among Allied units and caused a reaction that was much more damaging. Traffic of Allied officers of all ranks and of reinforcements and supplies, was seriously slowed down by the sudden need to repeatedly stop at checkpoint after checkpoint and identify as genuine Americans, and not just by presenting identification papers but also by having to answer American Trivia questions, because of the obvious suspicion that the disguised Germans also carry phony American papers.

When some of Skorzeny's soldiers were captured, they told their interrogators that their mission was to reach Paris and assassinate the Allied supreme commander, General Eisenhower. This was a lie, but they also said that their commander was Skorzeny, which was true, and since Skorzeny's record with regard to foreign leaders was well known, it was immediately believed that Skorzeny was trying to get to Eisenhower, and as a result Eisenhower was confined to his office for a long time, massively guarded.

Skorzeny considered Operation Greif a failure. Because of delays, only a small number of his men actually infiltrated behind the Allied lines, and the rest, most of his unit, had to fight as regular soldiers.

## **The end of the war**

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In February 1945, Otto Skorzeny demonstrated his command skills for the last time, successfully holding a German defense line on the Oder river, 50mi East of Berlin, for a critical period. Hitler summoned Skorzeny again, awarded him the Knights Cross with oak leaves, and sent him to an inspection tour along the rapidly collapsing German East front.

Two days before Hitler committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin, Skorzeny was given his last mission, to go to Bavaria in southern Germany and command the German forces there in a last battle to the bitter end, as part of what was called "The Alpine Fortress", but when he got there, there was nothing left to command. Ten days later the war ended, and Skorzeny, "The most dangerous man in Europe", surrendered. His commando unit, separately sent to "The Alpine Fortress", surrendered in Linz, Hitler's home town in Austria.

In the post-war Nuremberg Trials, Skorzeny was accused of war crimes for Operation Greif, but was acquitted after a senior British special operations officer testified that Allied special forces had also sometimes fought in enemy uniform.

After his release from POW camp was delayed for a long time, Skorzeny escaped, and reached the Fascist Spain. He then moved to Argentina, where he was employed as security advisor and bodyguard. He also advised Nasser, the dictator of Egypt. Eventually Otto Skorzeny returned to his pre-war occupation as a civil engineer and established a successful construction company in Spain that made him a multi-millionaire. He died in 1975.

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